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DE RUEHCV #0717/01 0761447
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INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEM COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6154
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5273
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1780
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 9988
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1059
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3624
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0618
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1853
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3341
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 0871
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0665
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 2900
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000717

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/15/2021
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: BRV PUMMELS THE PRESS AGAIN

REF: A. CARACAS 536

[1](#)B. CARACAS 664

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The BRV moved again against the opposition media, implicating a total of six journalists in legal actions in the past week. Two columnists at Caracas daily El Nacional and four local radio announcers at an Anzoategui state radio station were caught up in the latest sweep. The move follows a string of recent BRV actions against the press, (reftels a and b). Government officials, including the Vice-President and the new Communications Minister, sought to justify the latest charges, claiming they were waging a "battle for the truth." The media is one of the few remaining independent institutions of democracy in Venezuela, and recent BRV moves are clearly designed to corral and even muzzle it. As we saw in the case against Gustavo Azocar (reftel b), local political opportunism has begun to play a significant role in BRV targeting of the press, a shift from the BRV's previously more centralized attacks on national media figures and outlets. End summary.

VP Lashes Out Against El Nacional

[1](#)2. (C) A Caracas court on March 13 issued an arrest order for El Nacional columnist Ibeyise Pacheco, who in 2005 had been found guilty of defamation and sentenced to nine months in prison for publishing materials which called into question the academic qualifications of Colonel Angel Bellorin. The judge denied Pacheco any procedural benefits such as house arrest. Upon presenting herself in to authorities March 15, Pacheco told the crowd which turned out to support her that she had no fear of "the times to come" and publicly accused the attorney general's office of persecuting the media. Over

1,000 people rallied at the courthouse, including journalists Napoleon Bravo and Marianella Salazar, who also face defamation charges, and Sumate leader Maria Corina Machado. Taking a higher profile than she has of late, Machado addressed the crowd and declared Sumate's support for freedom of expression in Venezuela. Media sources told emboffs that after her hearing March 15, Pacheco was taken to Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services (DISIP) headquarters, in what most interpreted as an open effort to intimidate Pacheco, since DISIP is widely believed to use torture against detainees. The court then ruled to release Pacheco on house arrest. Pacheco told emboffs March 16 it was unclear whether she would be permitted to write her column during her arrest. She tested the waters March 17 with an El Nacional column entitled "Prison has begun" in which she criticizes the BRV's recent actions against the press.

13. (U) In a separate judicial ruling March 13, a Caracas court determined there was enough evidence to send the case of El Nacional columnist Marianella Salazar to trial. Salazar is accused of defamation for a column she wrote in June 2003 in which she denounced Vice President Jose Vincente Rangel and then-Defense Minister Diosdado Cabello for "irregularities" in the purchase of military radars. Upon learning of the court's decision, Salazar noted that neither the Vice President or Cabello had responded to the charges three years ago, and accused the BRV of using the judiciary against the media to criminalize dissent in an election year. Salazar is free pending trial.

14. (C) Government officials, led by Vice President Rangel, defended the BRV's actions against El Nacional. In an open letter to El Nacional's editorial board, the Vice President

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called upon Pacheco and Salazar to defend the accusations made in their columns, stating that "they have accused high government officials of murder, kidnapping, terrorism and robbery...and neither of them have presented any proof of these allegations." Newly appointed Communications Minister Willian Lara echoed the Vice President when he said that the BRV was engaged with the media in a "battle for the truth", putting himself directly in front of the issue publicly perhaps in an attempt to prove himself in his new position.

15. (C) The BRV is clearly singling out El Nacional. The Caracas daily has been dogged by comments by high-ranking government officials in recent weeks. President Chavez has increasingly railed against El Nacional owner Miguel Otero on his weekly television broadcast Alo Presidente. Columns by Marciano, the pseudonym used by Vice President Rangel for his missives in pro-government paper Vea, have also targeted the paper. A cartoon published by pro-government paper La Razon March 12 showed the Ambassador giving orders to the El Nacional's owner. Whatever the reason, the BRV's message to El Nacional March 13 was crystal: back-off or face the consequences.

Anzoategui Governor Targets Local Radio Station

16. (C) Police forces entered the offices of local Anzoategui radio station Orbita March 10 to issue summons to four of the station's announcers -- Manuel Rocca, Hector Cordero, Angel Morillo and Jose Brito -- who were called to testify March 14 in the state prosecution's investigation of station owner Fernando Zaurin. Anzoategui Governor Tarek William Saab accused Zuarin of sponsoring a hate campaign against him in December 2005 and asked state prosecutors to determine whether Zuarin could be charged under the Social Responsibility Law for defamation. At the time, Saab told the press "Nobody, regardless of whether they control the media, has the right to massacre the honor of any Venezuelan." Both opposition and pro-government press have speculated that the March 10 raid's real objective was Zaurin's arrest, and

pro-opposition Anzoategui daily El Impacto quoted Saab as saying that "once the dog (Zaurin) dies, my headache will be gone." While this should be taken with the requisite lump of salt, it is clear the case against the station is being driven at a local level by the state's chavista Governor, much as we saw in a parallel action against Tachira journalist Gustavo Azocar March 7.

Ambassador, NGOs Defend Press Freedom

17. (U) The Ambassador told the press March 14 that "all nations have the obligation to respect international law (regarding press freedom) and to listen to the opinions of the organizations the international community created to monitor freedom of expression." Both international and Venezuelan press NGOs, including Reporters without Borders, Public Space, the Venezuelan Institute for Press and Society, and the Venezuelan Press Bloc, have been vocal in their support of the accused journalists.

COMMENT

18. (C) As the BRV's "battle for the truth" wages on in this election year, we are seeing accelerating government action against the press on both national and state levels. The BRV's anti-media campaign -- previously disguised under layers of legislation and rhetoric -- has become less subtle since the beginning of the year. Which outlets are chosen for attack is interesting; like most BRV actions, this assault seems largely improvised at the tactical level, even as the

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overall strategy of corralling and then muzzling the press has become quite clear. The pressure against El Nacional) which moved decisively to moderate its previously unalloyed pro-opposition editorial line) sent a powerful signal as to the merits of compromise with the Bolivarians. State authorities have been far more direct in their persecution of the press than their more polished counterparts in Caracas. It will be interesting to see how the BRV manages its international image in light of these developments.

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